

"Therapeutic Lying:" Applied Ethical Reasoning for Psychology Students

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Introduction

Therapeutic lying and deception are frequently employed by caregivers of older adults with neurocognitive disorders, such as Alzheimer's disease. These conditions often involve severe anterograde amnesia: while past memories remain intact, new experiences fail to be encoded, resulting in "time-shifting." Consequently, individuals may repeatedly relive significant news, such as a spouse's death. To avert repeated emotional trauma, caregivers sometimes mislead or redirect conversations and minimize distress—for example, by directing individuals to a fake bus stop when they wish to leave their facility.

Method

Students were introduced to three ethical frameworks—utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. They then examined cases of therapeutic deception, including "fake bus stops" in care facilities and explicit lying about a spouse's death (e.g., claiming the spouse is out shopping). Each scenario prompted students to evaluate whether deception can be justified to prevent distress.

Results

Students completed pre- and post-activity ratings (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), revealing a nuanced perspective. Although they recognized lying as morally wrong (mean rating = 2.11), they also viewed deception as acceptable when it protects an individual's well-being. Students were somewhat more supportive of deceiving a person about a deceased spouse (mean rating = 4.00) than using "fake bus stops" (3.33) to calm an agitated patient.

Discussion

In analyzing a real-world scenario, students were able to apply multiple ethical theories. Findings suggest that students grapple with reconciling the categorical imperative of honesty and the principle of beneficence. Although deontological and virtue-based arguments underscore the immorality of lying, many students ultimately adopted a utilitarian perspective that prioritizes minimizing distress. By examining multiple ethical viewpoints, students gained deeper insight into how each framework can justify or oppose therapeutic deception. Overall, the exercise underscored the complexity

Is the first author also the speaker?

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Please indicate up to five keywords regarding the content of your contribution

Ethics, Neurocognitive Disorders, Problem-Based Learning

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